

Another study? Reclaimed water is not a feasible alternative; [1,7 Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The odiousness of "toilet to tap," by whatever name it's called, is only one wrong turn in the ignoble history of water reclamation in San Diego County. The environmentalists' continued insistence on pushing outmoded reclamation technology at any cost to ratepayers is another one. If the city is going to spend \$900,000 on clean water, why not invest it in controlling polluted runoff or donate it to the new San Diego River Conservancy? This new water reclamation study would tread already-covered ground.

San Diego bought into water reclamation in the mid-1980s to satisfy complaints from the Environmental Protection Agency and environmental groups that the Point Loma sewage treatment plant wasn't up to the same standards as other treatment plants. Exhaustive studies, however, have long shown that San Diego's sewage effluent does not harm the ocean environment.

Full Text (507 words)

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The San Diego City Council is about to approve a very expensive sop to environmental groups in the form of a \$900,000, one-year study on how to increase the use of reclaimed water.

The coalition of environmentalists, made up of the Sierra Club, San Diego BayKeeper and the Surfrider Foundation, says that if the council agrees to this study, it will help settle a lawsuit by the groups against the city over sewage treatment. The study would include another look at "toilet to tap" -- taking refined sewage and putting it into drinking-water reservoirs. This idea, which was rejected by the city in 1999, is now being called "reservoir augmentation."

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As righteous as the belief may sound, it isn't feasible. Reclamation is very expensive. Seawater desalination is now less expensive and its price continues to drop. Desalinated water can be piped through existing water pipes. Reclaimed water cannot.

The city of San Diego has spent about \$500 million on water reclamation, mostly on building two plants, one of which doesn't work yet. The North City plant processes 25 million gallons a day of sewage, but dumps 21 million gallons of that into the ocean. The remaining 4 million gallons are reused, but the biggest customer is the North City plant itself. There isn't much actual demand for

reclaimed water.

The real cost of reclamation and separate pipelines has never been revealed; in fact, the city's records and measurements of reclaimed water are so convoluted that it may be impossible to know the precise figure.

Environmentalists argue that it makes no sense to spend all this money on water reclamation, only to dump most of the product into the sea. And they're right. But it makes even less sense to spend more money in an effort to sell even more subsidized reclaimed water at even greater cost to ratepayers, or to force San Diegans to drink it.

City Council members may vote to appease environmentalists by spending nearly a million dollars to re-study "toilet to tap" and various subsidized options. However, the result of an honest accounting of San Diego's water reclamation would be that it doesn't pencil out, especially when compared to today's fresh water options, such as desalination.

[Illustration]

1 DRAWING



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